

Daniel O'Connell

Daniel O'Connell (1775-1847) witnessed the horrors of the French revolution and the massacres of Irish people when they rebelled several times especially in 1798. This incited him to say in January 1799: 'A great deal of innocent blood was shed. Good God, what a brute man becomes when ignorant and oppressed. Oh Liberty! What horrors are committed in thy name'! Thus, he rejected the use of military means to achieve national ends and civil rights, and asserted that it is essential to 'have no secrets in politics', and that it is 'strictly necessary to work within the limits of the law and constitution'.

By the year 1800, some politicians, such as John Fitzgibbon (1749-1802), thought that the best way of defeating the revolutionary elements and dealing with the religious conflicts in Ireland was to unite the country with the rest of Britain under a single parliament. They also desired to consolidate the politico-economic links between Britain and Ireland and preserve the 'Protestant' character of the British constitution. Indeed, the British constitution was conceived by many people, such as Edward Newenham (1734-1814), as a 'Protestant constitution' and many Protestants thought that 'Emancipation' would violate the principles of the 'Protestant constitution' and make Catholics have political ascendancy since they were the majority in Ireland. Thus, the Act of Union took effect from 1 January 1801 and this meant the abolition of the houses of the Irish parliament and the unification of the Churches of England and Ireland into a single Protestant establishment of religion. The proposal for state payments to the Catholic clergy and the question of the Crown Veto over Catholic appointments were overlooked. King George III (1738-1820) declared his opposition to Catholic Emancipation because this would 'constitute a breach of his coronation oath'. This situation provided a considerable impetus to O'Connell to become more engaged in politics and impelled him to say: 'I was maddened when I heard the bells of St. Patrick's ring out a joyful peal for Ireland's degradation, as if it were a glorious national festival. My blood boiled, and I vowed that morning that the foul dishonour should not last, if I could put an end to it'. Then he attended a meeting of Catholics in Dublin and said: 'We are ready, it is said, to sell our country for a price. Let us show every friend of Ireland that Catholics are incapable of selling their country'. This means that O'Connell thought the Union would destroy the religious and civil liberty and independence of Ireland. But opposition to the Union and the struggle for Emancipation needed Catholic support and therefore O'Connell provoked Catholic sentiments by saying, for instance, that 'the Catholics of Ireland still remember they have a country, and that they would never accept any advantages as a sect that would destroy them as a people'.

O'Connell was aware of the immense prejudice and restrictions against Catholics. Catholics, for example, were able to stand for election to parliament, but many of them resented the parliamentary oath which described the 'Popish religion' as 'superstitious' and 'idolatrous'. There was also the widespread preconception that Catholicism was pernicious to national order and civil liberty. Because of such unavoidable circumstances, O'Connell realised the need to join the Catholic Committee in November 1804 and participate in preparing a Catholic petition for 'unqualified Emancipation'. This petition was opposed by the House of Lords and the House of Commons in May 1805. Persistent disapproval of Catholic petitions exasperated O'Connell and persuaded him to organise popular protest meetings and

attack the Union and the British government: 'The present administration had emancipated Negroes...they should introduce a Clause in the Slave Bill to raise Catholics to the rank of Freemen'.

O'Connell began in 1810 to establish a series of local Catholic boards in connection with the general Catholic Committee in Dublin. He then prompted Catholics to spurn the Veto 'which forbade the appointment of any Catholic bishop without the approval of the Crown'. O'Connell believed that the Veto, as he says, would 'have the effect, if passed into law, of placing in the hands of the Minister a new and extensive source of patronage'. Moreover, O'Connell used his influential position as the principal speaker and agitator of the Catholic Committee to oppose any delay in presenting petitions to parliament for the total annulment of the penal laws. This meant the repudiation of the Veto, even for the sake of some concessions, and the interference of the state in ecclesiastical affairs. Thus, it was O'Connell who persuaded the Irish laity to say in March 1810: 'as Irishmen and Catholics we never can consent to any dominion or control whatsoever over the appointment of our Prelates on the part of the Crown or the servants of the Crown'.

Not all Catholics had accepted O'Connell's policy of 'unqualified Emancipation'. For instance, in 1813, the English Catholic Board and Irish Catholic aristocrats endorsed a Catholic Relief Bill which conceded the right to the government to exercise some form of control on Catholic appointments. In 1814, a Roman papal cleric, Monsignore Quarantotti (1733-1820), 'gave theological justifications' for the Veto. Such actions were denounced by O'Connell who said: 'How dismal the prospect of liberty would be if in every Catholic diocese there were an active partisan of the Government and in every Catholic parish a priest as an active informer'. He also condemned what he described to be 'the attempt made by the slaves of Rome to instruct the Irish Roman Catholics upon the manner of their emancipation'. Thus, in order to encounter more 'compromising negotiations' between Catholics and the government, O'Connell suggested creating a new agitation in favour of 'unqualified Emancipation'. He also urged the people to abandon all those clergymen who do not take an active part in opposing the Veto. The Veto thus was defeated and O'Connell continued to talk intensively to Irish Catholics about Irish history and Ireland's foregoing greatness.

O'Connell recognised Catholic priesthood as a source of immense strength and the Catholic Church as the last stronghold of the Irish people uncontrolled by British rule. He therefore planned to unite the Catholic population, under the leadership of priesthood, into one political league, which should vindicate the claims of Catholics and protest against the unpleasant situations. In 1823, Daniel O'Connell co-founded the Catholic Association of Ireland for the removal of discrimination against Catholics. He mentioned that there would be no election of members and only their subscription would be required. The clergy do not need to subscribe but are to be honorary members. In February 1824, O'Connell introduced the 'Catholic Rent' which included a subscription of a penny a month for every member. The money was to be used to forward petitions 'not only on the subject of Catholic Emancipation, but for the redress of all local or general grievances afflicting the Irish people'. This included money for the education of the poor and to help the Catholics in building schools and churches and to improve the conditions of the Catholic clergy in Ireland. In effect, O'Connell was forming the first mass Irish political party.

However, in February 1825, Chief Secretary for Ireland Henry Goulburn (1784-1856) introduced the 'Bill for the Suppression of Unlawful Associations in Ireland' which suppressed the Catholic Association under the pretext that it was a

threat to political stability. The suppression of the Catholic Association proved to be an ineffective motion as O'Connell could avoid the Bill by changing the name of his Association to 'New Catholic Association' and complying with the law by affirming that the Association is for the 'purpose of public and private charity' and 'all purposes not forbidden by the Act'.

O'Connell had an acute discernment into the sentiments and attitudes of the Irish people. The dissatisfaction of Irish Catholics was a major factor in his struggle for Catholic Emancipation. The issue of Emancipation symbolised the social and political aspirations of the Irish Catholics. Thus, after he became the 'uncrowned king of Ireland', Irish Catholics felt it was necessary for O'Connell to take part in elections to influence political decisions. Therefore, in July 1828, O'Connell was elected as MP but was not allowed to take his seat in the House of Commons. This situation enraged many Irish Catholics. To the British government, Emancipation seemed, as A. D. Macintyre says, 'the only alternative to the collapse of Irish society into rebellion and civil war'.

In April 1829, the British Parliament passed the Roman Catholic Relief Act which was described by O'Connell as a 'bloodless revolution more extensive in its operation than any other political change that could take place'. The Relief Act granted Catholic Emancipation and later enabled O'Connell to take his seat in February 1830. The Act abolished the old oaths of allegiance and Catholics were obliged to swear allegiance to the Crown and to disclaim the deposing power of the Pope and his assumption of jurisdiction in the United Kingdom. Although the Catholic Association was dissolved, the new Act permitted Catholics to become legislators, opened public and municipal posts for Catholics and terminated the Convention Act of 1793, which forbade the holding of any representative political assembly other than parliament and corporate bodies. Therefore, Catholics were allowed to carry out religious celebrations outside their houses or churches.

Nevertheless, some disabilities or 'securities' remained under the new Act. For instance, 'marriages before Catholic priests continued to be invalid'; the Catholic priests were forbidden to wear their ecclesiastical vestments in public; and, Catholic charities were regarded as 'superstitious usages'. All these matters, however, could not prevent O'Connell from celebrating 'the most remarkable day' of his life and the 'first day of freedom'.

In his struggle for the Catholic Emancipation of 1829, Daniel O'Connell's remarkable strength emerged from his erudite knowledge of the law and his dynamic ability to dominate legal proceedings, as well as his defiance of the political establishment which he impelled to rule in accordance with law and constitution. His great achievement was his emphasis on parliamentary reform and universal liberty. He was able to link Catholic Emancipation to parliamentary conventions.

The established churches of England and Ireland were an integral part of the British constitution which was widely perceived as 'Protestant constitution'. This was a principal impediment to Catholic Emancipation. O'Connell realised that fact and endeavoured to expose the 'unholy union' between church and state to obtain his national ends. Moreover, the parliamentary oath was also a major problem for Catholics. Thus, in one respect, the Emancipation question revolved around the substitution of the oath formula.

The Catholic Association and the Catholic Rent provided a brilliant method in political education and a substantial fund for O'Connell's 'agitation' and made it possible to create a mass membership. O'Connell was able to organise a series of

mass movements and use popular power to influence Parliament and to bring a new life and a public dimension to his legal and political struggle.

Catholic Emancipation necessitated a considerable apportionment and transfer of power in Ireland and emphasised the fact that the Catholic masses of Ireland had become a formidable political power.

O'Connell, as an Irish Catholic, was unique in his belief in universal liberty and his commitment to liberalism and freedom which helped achieve Catholic Emancipation. His extraordinary power stems from the reality that he spoke for all those people who were concerned with the question of Emancipation.

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